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e-Business in the chemical processing industry

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e-Business will transform every institution and industry, create new winners and losers, and generate competitive forces that will threaten the world's most entrenched brands. As a result, the subject of information technology strategy has moved on to the agenda of CEOs worldwide, who clearly understand that it is impossible for them to separate it from their business direction. You cannot find an industry, government or organization where someone has not gained massive competitive advantage through the implementation of information technology (IT).

The competitive position of our enterprises has benefited from profound restructuring and deregulation in recent years. Now, we have the opportunity to take advantage of a second wave, a second fundamental restructuring as the result of the ultimate emergence of IT as a transformational force.

In analyzing the role of e-business in the refining industry, we want to first understand how to make profits given the new industry dynamics. The fundamental change we need to understand is that the customer today has much more information, which has resulted in a major shift of power from the vendor to the customer. This affects the way we think of the customer and approach the marketplace.

In this new environment, successful businesses are those that employ "customercentric" thinking. Such a focus on customers leads to identifying their priorities, behavior, wants and needs. Once this is done, we can see where the opportunities are for profits. Whereas the traditional business tactic was to gain market share and assume (or hope) that profitability would automatically follow, the new way of thinking recommends dissecting customer priorities to find new areas of profit, then pursuing those areas to achieve market share.

Customer-centric

What exactly is customer-centric thinking? How does it develop? Certainly, it is not conventional market research with mountains of tables and oceans of data, without a single actionable insight. Nor is it traditional customer

satisfaction research, discovering what the customer thinks is right or wrong, then dwelling on that.

Rather, it is strategic and focused thinking which deciphers the puzzle of the customer's top two or three priorities with enough insight to have a good chance of matching those priorities profitably.

If the new way of thinking about market share is diametrically opposed to the logic of the traditional approach, then the value chain must also be turned inside out.

To begin customer-centric thinking, we must reverse the traditional value chain. Whereas the customer is usually the final piece of the traditional value chain, customer priorities are the beginning of the modern value chain.

Therefore, the first step in customer-- centric thinking is understanding customer wants and needs-that is, customer segmentation (Figure 1). Some refining and petrochemical companies are beginning to do this, and it is having an impact on how they do business with their customers.

Market segmentation by customer priorities requires answering questions like, "Which customer priorities can we meet today? Which market segment is most profitable to us? What is my basis for competitive advantage? Where must I invest now?"

Specialty chemicals are a well-established subsegment of the petrochemicals industry. These are chemicals with special performance attributes that are designed for specific product applications. This is an expanding subsegment of the industry, with many profitable areas still available.

If we think of all these subsegments as a pyramid, then the stabilizing bottom layer is heavy with commodity chemicals. Here are the volume products-ethylene, benzene, propylene, and the like-that form the foundation of everything else.

Within each of these subsegments can be found several types of customers. Before we go any further, let me identify the elements of customer priorities that we need to understand, because these are key to cracking the code of customer priorities. After all, if we do not understand the customer, we cannot have the basis of customer-centric thinking.

The structure of a customer's needs, behavior, decision-making process, price sensitivities and preferences is very complex and needs e-business tools to be dealt with thoroughly.

Electronic Business

Let us define e-business. e-Business stands for electronic business and is concerned with transforming key business processes, using Internet technologies. At IBM, we coined the term e-business to describe vital interactions that will be conducted on the net. We think of it as more than selling over the Web or e-commerce. e-Business includes transactions among employees inside an enterprise, among trading partners in a supply chain, etc. According to the New York Times and other topline media, the 1998 holiday season may have been the turning point in consumer acceptance and purchasing that online businesses have been waiting for. But, some parts of the business world had already learned the value of e-- business. They are very familiar with the efficiency and effectiveness of e-business. How can the rest of us move from a traditional business mode to e-business?

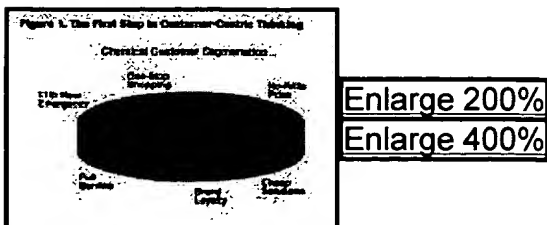


Figure 1.



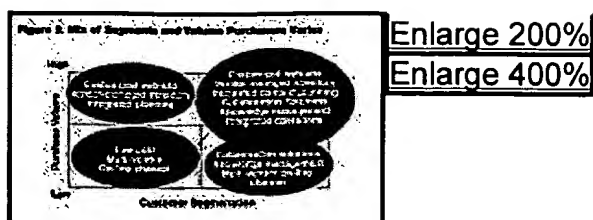


Figure 2.

Let's return to the idea of customer segmentation. All customers are not the same (Figure 2). The role of e-business varies by business for each customer set. You know the famous 20/80 rule: 20% of our customers buy 80% of our products. We need to understand volume purchasers, for example, before we can know how to best serve them. For small to medium purchases, online selling is a low-cost channel that is simultaneously flexible and accurate. It is especially workable for the low-cost commodity purchaser. The seller can provide information on product, quantity, grade, price, availability and shipping to the buyer. There may be a way for the buyer to track the order until it reaches the plant door. There are extensive savings to be achieved on both sides of the transaction.

The refining industry may discover competitive advantages similar to what is evolving in the chemical industry. Syncon is an example of a company that has set up an online chemical marketplace. Its WWW Chemicals website includes links to a variety of service and product providers; a catalog of chemical offerings, divided into fine chemicals and specialty chemicals; and a shopping center where certain chemicals can be purchased. [ChemConnect](#) is another network serving chemical buyers and sellers. At its Trading Exchange, buyers can post their requests for price quotes on specific products, and manufacturers and distributors list their products and services. Surplus for Sale Exchange is designed for sellers of extra, off-spec or byproduct chemicals where speed of disposition is particularly important.

e-Business plays a major role in the process of turning molecules into customized solutions. Across a continuum, e-business allows a constant movement between the molecules and the final valuable product, between substance and knowledge. The company that can move smoothly between these steps will have a competitive advantage over others.

In the future, competitive advantage will be based on the concept of unique combinations of product and relationship. This idea can be plotted within a matrix with the degree of product uniqueness on the y-axis and degree of relationship uniqueness along the x-axis. Product differentiation varies from the commodity chemicals at the low end to highly specialized agrichemicals at the top. The relationship between the buyer and seller will vary from reliability of the product to value-added services for favored customers.

Customer Priorities

We can now start to map the product or service offerings against the customer's priorities to establish the role e-business plays. Polypropylene is a commodity that fits into the low product differentiation and low relationship uniqueness quadrant. The buyer needs consistent product quality and dependable availability. Convenience may be an additional factor in product procurement and/or usage. When the product is in the category of advanced materials, however, there is a more limited pool of suppliers and the buyer may select a supplier based on trust in their reputation and brand image. Their relationship expands to include some onsite visits to provide expert assistance in the application of the product to the customer's business. At the top end of both uniqueness of product and relationship would be technology licensing. Here, the product may feature patent protection or some special attributes, with few or even one supplier, and the relationship includes value-added services above and beyond the usual scope of product delivery.

With regard to customer-centric thinking, the question now becomes how are we going to meet the customer priorities in this arena; and how does e-business facilitate that. While always keeping our strategic position in mind, there is an array of tools we can use to enhance our responsiveness to the customer. These tools also improve our own understanding and controls. We can even perform simulations to inform ourselves of likely or best outcomes (Figure 3).

Let's look at inventory as an example. A variety of data can be input, such as customers' standing orders, production schedules and inventory level sensors. The data is then funneled through an electronic data interface (EDI) to produce an optimum solution. This not only gives us a clear picture of our inventory situation, but links it

neatly to our customer's needs and wants.

To expand on this process, let us consider supply chain optimization. Integrated supply chain management involves: managing the flow of material, information, and revenue from your suppliers' suppliers to your customers' customers. It includes all appropriate organizational and support structures, such as distribution, marketing and sales. This is an enterprise process which is very important to our industry. Visionary leaders understand that the well-managed supply chain process can lead to both revenue improvement and cost reduction at the same time.

Supply Chain Performance

To better control the supply chain, we can identify three governors of supply chain performance. These are variability, velocity and visibility (Figure 4), and the degree of competitive advantage achieved depends on the degree to which e-business practices have been adopted. Let's examine each of these governors.

Visibility in the supply chain is simply knowing what's happening within and outside of one's company. But, there is a paradigm shift involved: instead of only the visibility of the finished goods, there must be a visibility of supply chain activities and of trading partners' abilities within the virtual enterprise as a whole. Instead of just the company, there has to be concern for the whole team of participants. In each case, there are e-business enablers to assist in collecting, monitoring and applying data.

Velocity in the supply chain represents the heartbeat of the business. Whether we are considering data velocity, planning velocity or execution velocity, there are e-business enablers to assist the process. Again, a paradigm shift occurs, moving from the velocity of the order-to-- cash process to the velocity of the entire product commercialization process.

Variability implies managing changing customer demands and supply chain capabilities. (Figure 5). Your loyal customer today may have a different set of demands next month. If you are not ready and able to adapt your supply chain capabilities, that customer may cease being loyal. Once again, this point-of-view requires a paradigm shift: from variability through better forecasts to leveraging variability readiness to configure products in response to customers' demands.

The desire for customer intimacy will create an increasing number of demand patterns, each of which will need to be analyzed. Additionally, the number of variables that need to be considered for effective planning will also necessarily increase. e-Business, however, facilitates demand planning, as well as making it more accurate (Figure 6). This can be done by providing instantaneous access to real-time data and by providing feedback on promotions, pricing, availability and configuration to generate customized orders.



Figure 3.

Increase Revenue

Moving into e-business is an excellent way to increase potential revenues because the opportunities are limited only by your imagination. Consider that the Web has no standard business hours; it is open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. It also has no physical location; it is available in virtually every country of the world. The speed of decision-making transactions has been altered forever by the Internet, which in turn has changed the rules of competition and commerce.

To get a better read on the success customers are having with e-business-and to identify the problems that are holding them back--we conducted a fairly broad market study last summer. Our research focused on our most important source of information--our customers. Analyzing 160 interviews in 5 industries and 37 indepth case

studies with organizations that have implemented successful e-business solutions, we noticed 5 main roadblocks:

The perceived cost of implementation. Limited resources to put towards e-business.

Inadequate technology and solutions in the market.

Need to understand business value.

Concern about security issues.

e-Business allows you to leverage the information already in your hands, while expanding your customer base and transforming core business processes. Business transformation is a broad term encompassing many individual priorities and activities. It is generally accepted practice that the process of business transformation can follow or supersede the re-engineering of a company.

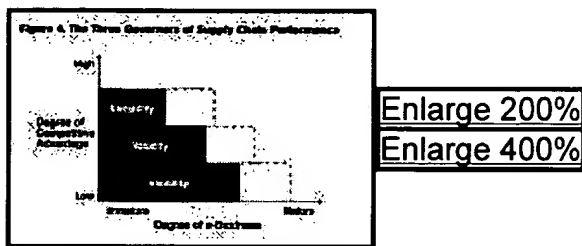


Figure 4.

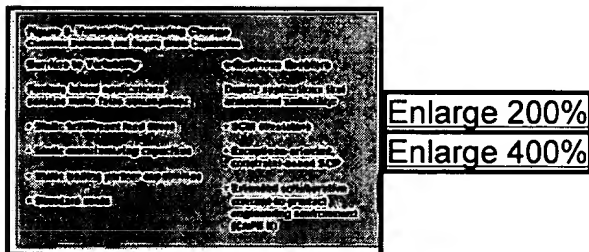


Figure 5.

But, the transformation entails a philosophical approach as well as a physical one. With the emergence of e-business, IT takes on a new level of importance for every organization. Technology has become much more than a tool for efficiency; it's a transforming force in all industries. To exploit the new capabilities made possible by e-business, companies must transform themselves.

e-Business offers companies the opportunity to reach new customers with a minimum of investment, to make vast improvements in customer service, and to streamline internal processes and distribution chains. So, it's not just about reducing costs and it's not just about finding new sources of revenue. It's about both. But, to do both, you have to transform your core business processes. Business transactions, for example, can be mass customized rather than mass marketed. This is possible because the e-- business process is so efficient and responsive. It is possible to present offerings and services on a much more individualized basis than the usual generalized marketing to a homogeneous market segment. Most importantly, e-business offers the means to encourage and reward customer loyalty, and it is axiomatic in any business that it takes far less time, energy and money to keep an existing customer than to find a new one.

Managing the customer relationship is key to any business, and the tool of e-- business enables you to accomplish it. As an example, consider Shell Chemicals, which established its e-business some years ago. Shell made it easy for its customers to do business online, and sales became win-- win- transactions. The entire process became streamlined, resulting in more accurate systems, faster accounting and fewer rush orders.

New Applications

A second important part of the e-business cycle is building new e-business applications. CIOs are faced with the challenge of how to design, develop and deploy e-business applications. How should you invest your application development resources to take advantage of the networked world? The effort it takes to design, establish and test your e-business arm will reap far more in good will, reduced energy and greater revenue.

A basic program of e-business applications would be divided into intranet and Internet functions. Internal e-mail and data posting include employee communications of various kinds, including employee benefits and other human resources responsibilities. Information management might involve sales force automation, distance learning and training, competitor intelligence and current customer information. This area leads to workgroup collaboration, where market planning, ISO tracking, new product design and transportation management take place.

Results of the workgroup's endeavors can lead to several places. It can lead to better integration of the global organization, including network management, global purchasing and supply chain integration. On the Internet side, it can lead to improved customer services, such as vendor managed inventory, consumer affairs, merchandise planning or loyalty programs.

Just as internal e-mail is the means of diverse communications among employees, external e-mail serves the same function to customers, investors and other interested parties. Paralleling information management on the intranet side is broadcast medium, which presents marketing communications in the form of advertising, promotional announcements, couponing, catalogs, even employment opportunity postings. This area leads to customer services, which we've already described, then to the electronic marketplace, where order processing, electronic data interface, and parts management occur.

The pivot point for all of these areas is the extranet convergence/connection, which acts as the traffic cop for the company's continuous collection, analysis and dispersal of information.

Running a responsive infrastructure offers additional opportunities. In line with the customer-centric approach, it adds flexibility and customization. By leveraging your experience, everyone in your network--both inside and outside the company--can benefit.

To support e-business, scalability and 24x7 availability must be integral to your system design. Security is also a big challenge as companies begin to migrate mission-critical applications to the net. First and foremost, leverage your customer. This means really knowing your customers, knowing their business, priorities, thinking, and taking them into new markets. Grow your customer base by focusing on a customer-centric interface, and by knowing your competition's strong and weak points to expand your customer base at their expense. Act quickly to establish leadership in your chosen niches by driving aggressively into electronic markets. Explore new technologies, then leverage the ones you select to use. And don't forget to create partnerships to support and forward your capabilities.

Finally, e-business requires you to leverage enormous amounts of information and knowledge available to all organizations in the networked world. In the Information Age, intellectual assets are as important as land, labor and capital. And e-business provides the tools necessary to become a learning organization, a business that routinely capitalizes on its intellectual assets to compete smarter and faster in a sense and respond style.

Within your company, identify and leverage core assets. Use them to march into new markets; concentrate your efforts by outsourcing non-core processes. Focus on time-to-market and cost, two of the most crucial factors for success. Aim for flexible and customizable processes, and exploit information to its fullest. Finally, act quickly to realign your company; this should take months, not years, to achieve. Focus on growth markets for the best returns, and leverage core competencies for rapid returns. Narrowing your scope and emphasizing your strengths is a surefire path to results.

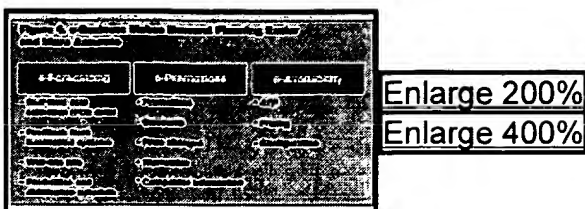





Figure 6.

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
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